

Memorandum

12 November 2010

To: Acton Planning Board
From: Historic District Commission
Regarding: "Beacon Court" Residential Subdivision Application Residential Compound Plan
57 Robbins Street, Acton
cc Board of Selectmen, Historic Commission, Design Review Board

Honorable Members of the Planning Board;

The *Acton 2020 Recap of the Phase One Outreach Process* notes that ***"Preserve rural and historic characteristics," was identified as the number one priority in six public meetings.*** It also notes that participants recognized that ***"The historic, New England architecture describes Acton's character."***

Nothing is more characteristic of a historic townscape of a New England rural community than the residential groupings comprised of a house, barn and other outbuildings. While these agrarian compounds are seen throughout Acton, they are now often only remnants of Acton's character on an otherwise banal streetscape of builder houses. In many places the original groups have been diminished by the demolition of barns and other outbuildings. Now, in many Acton townscapes, a prevalent residential grouping is comprised of an older, traditional house contributing to the aesthetic character of the street while one or more massive builder houses, in various approximations of traditional architecture, are looming in its backyard.

While this project is not in a Historic District and under the jurisdiction of the Historic District Commission, the proposed "Beacon Court" Subdivision Residential Compound Plan so embodies the two phenomena that are significantly diminishing the overall aesthetic integrity and value of Acton's townscape that the HDC has determined to take a firm position in its regard. The proposed plan both demolishes an existing barn and attached outbuilding on Robbins Street and provides sites for two large "backyard" houses. The destruction of a small structure or the diminishing of a historic compound in the historic townscape may not be considered significant; the cumulative effect of these demolitions is immensely destructive.

The HDC also desires to be constructive in its criticism by proposing strategies in which more of the existing residential compound, including the major portion of the existing barn, can be integrated into the proposed design in a useful manner that also contributes more to preserving the *rural and historic characteristics* of the community. These strategies and the HDC's position on maintaining the density of the existing landscape are set out on page 2.

Together with the existing house at 57 Robbins, the associated barn and its rear extension form an essential part the existing agrarian compound facing Robbins Street. Together they contributes significantly to the few remaining *rural and historic characteristics* gracing their streetscape with Acton's desired character. While the Development Impact Report Addendum rightly identifies the saving of the historic house at No. 57 as a measure to mitigate the impact of the project, it fails to even mention the demolition of a significant part of its existing historic residential compound. This fact can only be discovered in the drawings as a dashed outline and a small note. The Report also describes the existing house as preserved "as an integral part of the design" of a *Residential Compound*. To describe the design's placement of the front, formal, public facades of two new large houses facing the modest, private, rear elevation and garden of the existing house located between them and the street as having any formal aesthetic integrity in terms of architectural design or town planning is both misleading and risible.

Simply put, the proposed plan of “Beacon Court” is characteristic of a “backyard house” development. With two additional lots instead of one, however, the subdivision requirements for a “road” or a private way with a cul-de-sac or “T” turnabout rather than a driveway serving a single lot. Here, some nine of the waivers requested by the applicant are directly related to the design of vehicular access as essentially a shared driveway. While the report rightly describes the requested waivers in terms of being favorable to the aesthetics of the site in terms of decreased paved area, these are all of significant economic value to the applicant in terms of both construction cost and the “curb appeal” of the new properties. At the same time, the retention of the existing dwelling at 57 Robbins is of economic value as a third “unit” in the development, even if it does lack the amenities of the new houses in its former backyard.

Surprisingly, one of the significant amenities it lacks is enclosed parking. While the new structures have the 24’ wide garages requisite for new housing at a particular “price point,” the existing house has only an open parking area. Fully visible at the street, this parking and its “cars in the yard” appearance degrades the quality of the development on the street.

The Historic District Commission takes the position that the development is unacceptable in its current form, and in view of the extent and value of the waivers requested by the applicant, far more mitigation of the negative impact on the historic character of Robbins Street is required for it to be approved. The mitigation of impact and minimal preservation of the street’s historic character requires the retention of at least the barn’s major 20’x25’ front section as a design element. We see at least two strategies by which this might be achieved.

Strategies for utilizing the major section of the existing barn

The first strategy would relocate the major section of the barn to the site of the proposed surface parking area for the existing house. This could be achieved by providing a new foundation and slab on grade and moving the wood frame structure. Even in the days before mechanization, it was not uncommon to move small structures such as this barn to a new location in an agrarian compound. With the barn converted for use as a garage with doors on the side or rear, there would be the advantage of enclosing car parking with doors facing away from the street. This would add to the value of the barn’s mass screening the presence of the new rear buildings and preserving the historic character of the street.

The second strategy locates vehicular access to the rear houses at the southeast side of the existing house. The topography of the site would likely require the new driveway located in a manner that would require the removal of some trees and the elimination of the 1-story hip-roofed extension at the southeast end of the house. While at least one of the trees is large, they are not as significant as other specimens visible from the street, and the hipped extension to the house is not formally consistent with the rest of the building and not as historically significant as the ell at the opposite, northwest end of the building. Neither the trees nor the hipped end extension are at all significant in comparison with retaining the barn.

Maintaining the density of the existing landscape between the street and the new houses

In addition to the requirement to retain and integrate the barn in some manner, the waiver to relating to the requirement for street trees should not be granted. While the “T” driveway scheme retains more existing trees than a cul-de-sac, it still eliminates at least 3 trees of 18” to 24” diameter. These trees need to be replaced in the form of significant new “street” trees to eventually provide additional screening of the rear houses.

Thank you very much for your consideration of our position.